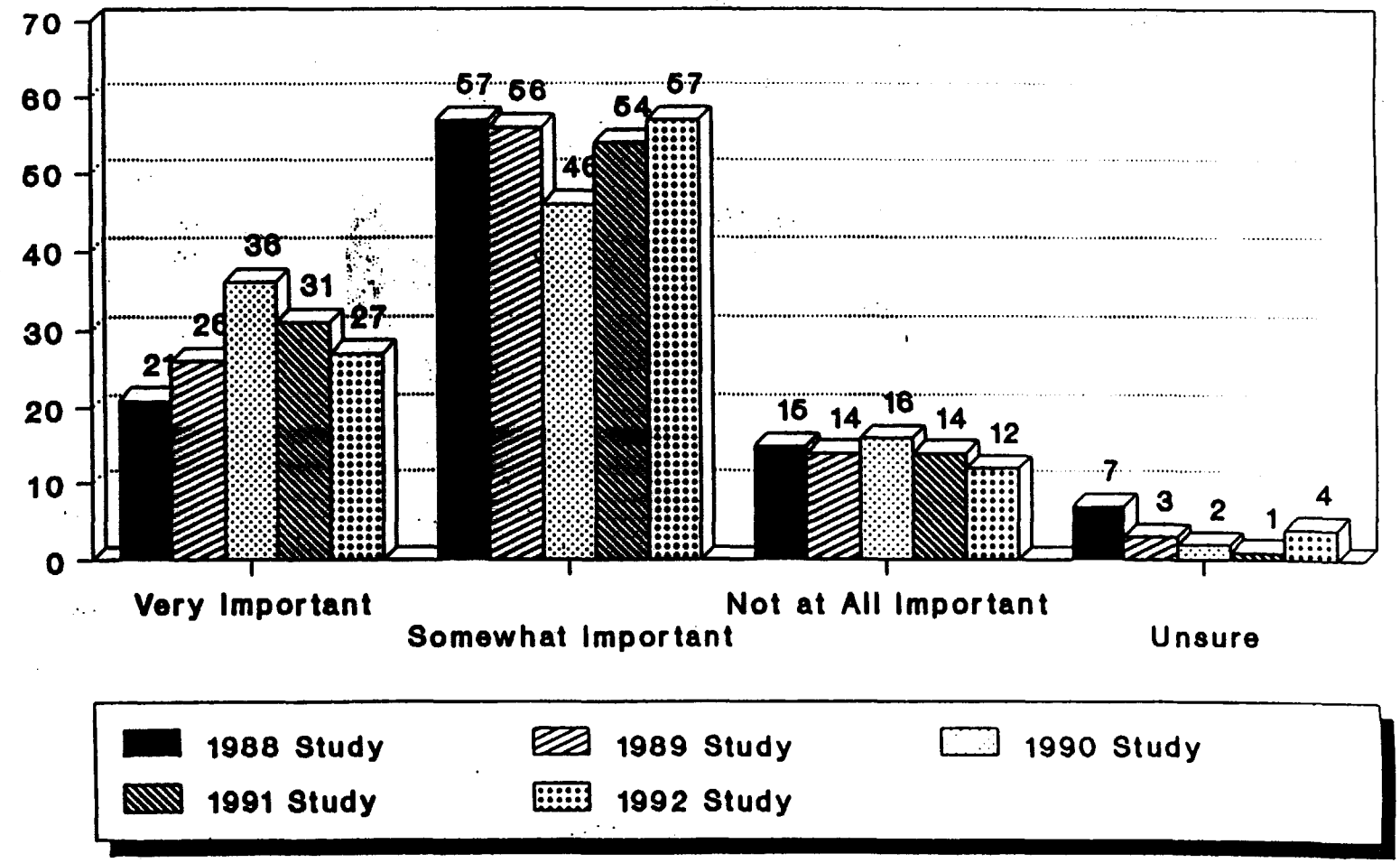
IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC ACCESS

Northwest Community Television



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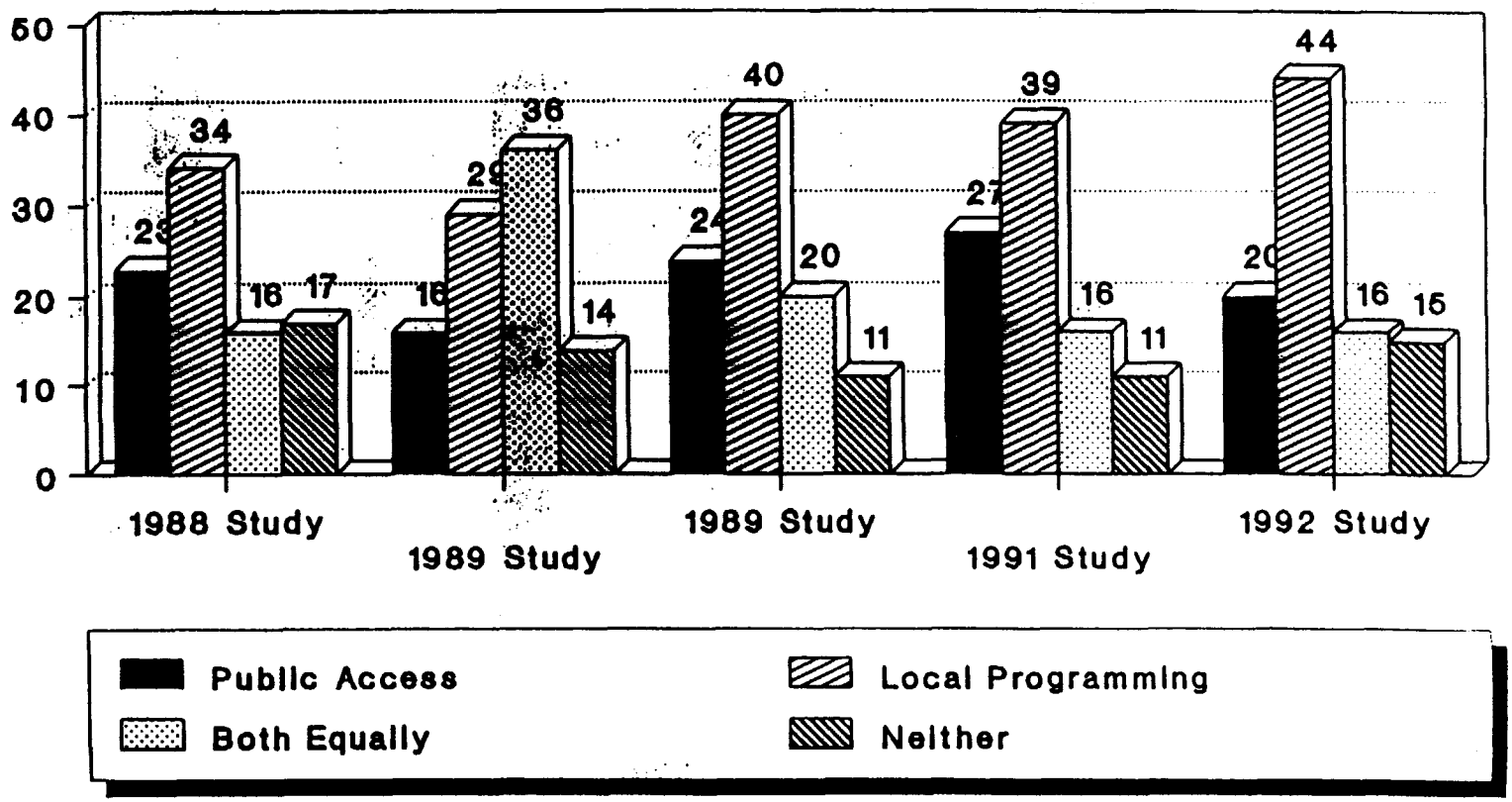
MOST IMPORTANT SERVICE

Public Access v Local Programming
Northwest Community Television



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The **PARTICIPATE** Report:

A Case Study of Public Access Cable Television in New York State

by
Diana Agosta
with
Caryn Rogoff
Abigail Norman

1990

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The research for this report was done by Diana Agosta, Caryn Rogoff and Abigail Norman. Diana Agosta analyzed the statistics, prepared the graphs and charts, and wrote the report. Abigail Norman did the graphic design.

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We have tried to report the results of our survey and the comments of our respondents as accurately as possible, and to interpret them fairly and reasonably. We apologize for any errors or omissions.

Introduction

Why study public access cable TV? Because it is an extraordinary experiment in democratic communications. Despite the robustness of the communications industries, the US public has little access to our communications media — a handful of letters to the editor, an occasional TV opinion spot, some responses on TV and radio call-in talk shows.

But television reaches almost every US home. What if everyone could use this powerful medium to express what was on his or her mind? What if it were possible for ordinary people, not just entrepreneurs or professional producers, to speak on the most powerful communications medium of our time?

How would people find out about it? Would they figure out how to secure this access? Who would use it? What would they use it for, and how would they use it? What would the obstacles be, and what would be easy? What would people be afraid of?

Would their programs warm the hearts of civil liberties activists, or would they be a little embarrassing, like amateur nights or late night commercials? Would there result a significant difference in local democratic institutions, or in how we see ourselves as Americans?

Or would this opportunity simply be ignored?

These questions underlie the PARTICIPATE survey. But since so many of these questions require or assume very subjective judgments, our focus was a step removed. We studied the structures that a variety of individuals, organizations and institutions have developed to provide and use public access. We reported on the programming they have developed so far, not to say it is good or bad, incendiary or inspiring, entertaining or embarrassing. For both programming and facilities, our goal was to see what there is, how it works, and why.

But we do believe that public access cable has significant potential to provide people with a way to exercise their First Amendment rights consistent with this age of electronic communications. It may or may not be ultimately successful or everlasting — Congress, the Courts, local governments and the cable companies are still not speaking with one voice. And it may or may not provide a precedent for access to other communications media. This study provides information to determine to what extent public access cable TV has achieved its potential, and why, in one state at one point in time.

The first question is: What is public access cable? Analogies abound: Access is a televised version of the streetcorner soapbox, or access is to communications media as public park land is to real estate. It has been said that freedom of the press belongs to those who own presses. Public access cable television is perhaps an electronic printing press, available to a whole community.

At its most basic, public access is a channel on cable television, or channel time, available to be programmed by the public. Where there is a commitment to access, public access facilities include the production equipment and training to enable non-professionals to produce television programs for access channels.

The specifics of that channel time and facilities depend on the franchise agreement that the city, town or county has negotiated with the cable company wiring its area. In exchange for using city streets or utility poles to string its cables to each home, cities may request and cable companies may agree to provide access services, or provide the channel time and support for the city or a third party non-profit organization to provide access facilities.

Whoever eventually provides access services, public access is the only place where any individual or organization can use television to communicate directly on an uncensored, first-come, first-served basis.

Public access is a grassroots local information network. It reaches all cable subscribers. And cable often appears in schools, hospitals, community centers and even neighborhood bars.

This did not occur out of the blue. As electronic communications media — telegraph, radio, telephone, television — were developed, legal and regulatory formulas were devised to guarantee that the public interest was served, that citizens' communications needs and not just commercial interests were reflected, despite the relative scarcity of airtime and increasing mono-

polization of ownership. Public access takes the public's First Amendment rights a step further.

In the early 1970s, with the emergence of low-cost and portable video equipment, many community media activists worked enthusiastically to make public access a reality. The following decade saw a dramatic increase in the number of homes wired for cable, now reaching over half of all television owners. Many communities steadily accumulated experience with access production, and producers established networks such as the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers (NFLCP). In 1984, the NFLCP guessed that 1,200 cable systems carried public access programming. By 1990, the NFLCP estimates almost 2,000 systems with access programming nationwide.

With the growing popularity of consumer video equipment at home and in schools, producing public access programming is now within reach of even more of the general public. Local artists, community organizations, minority groups and people otherwise denied access to the dominant communications medium of our time are now able to make and air their own television. And audience surveys around the country have consistently shown that people watch access when there is good programming on the channels.

Access has been credited with providing the visibility that elected a mayor who otherwise never could have afforded TV time, with educating a community about threats to its groundwater, with increasing cross-cultural understanding in racially tense communities. It has also been used to spread the hate messages of groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and to inspire local programming to refute such dangerous racist messages.

But perhaps these are the extraordinary stories. What is the ordinary story of access? This report seeks to answer that question by providing a cross-section of access in one state, during the mid-1980s.

We designed this study to address several questions, generally covered by the following. Of public access channels agreed to in franchise contracts, how many are actually active? Who uses them, and for what kinds of programs? Who would like to use them but doesn't — and why not? Of the different models of public access which have emerged in the past decade, which ones have worked best to ensure broad, diverse use of public access capacity? What are some of the main obstacles to firm establishment of public access?

The PARTICIPATE report is based on over two years of research, beginning with a questionnaire survey of all New York State cable operators (which met with a 90% response).[1] We also surveyed organizations and institutions that use public access or provide resources for its use: public library systems, selected media and arts centers, local arts councils, colleges and schools. We followed the questionnaires with in-depth telephone interviews (and visited sites to develop case-study descriptions of selected facilities).[2]

A computer program enabled us to quantify statistics, correlate data and search for crucial factors that affect the extent and range of community involvement in producing access programs.

Key findings are summarized in the first chapter, and the final chapter contains recommendations for developing access potential. Case studies based on the experience of public access facilities and access channel users appear throughout the report. Supplementary research forms the basis for an outline of size, ownership and other characteristics of cable systems in the state which may affect public access facilities and use. Short chapters outline state and federal legislation and regulation affecting public access.

This report provides an extensive basis for understanding public access in one state. It has been written for policy makers and students of telecommunications, as well as for experienced and potential community producers and programmers. We hope its conclusions about what makes public access work will help municipalities negotiating cable franchise agreements, cable systems' access coordinators as they plan to provide access, citizens seeking successful public access in their franchise areas, state and local cable commissions wishing to make the most of public access provisions, and other advocates of democratic communications.

Notes:

1. A list of respondents and copies of all questionnaires used are in the Appendix.

2. All information in this report comes from responses to questionnaires and interviews. Through follow-up interviews, we checked questionnaire responses and attempted to correct contradictions or misunderstandings. But this information was not independently checked. For example, a cable operator may have described as access something that was actually Local Origination (known as LO), or mentioned users who actually were on other channels. In some averages, data for the Manhattan cable systems were not included so that these averages would more accurately describe conditions in the rest of the state.
An important new development is the development of cable and access centers in New York City's outer boroughs, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Staten Island, serving a total of over five million people. In 1990, the Manhattan franchise is up for renewal and terms for an access corporation are being negotiated.

Chapter 1
Main Findings

Below is a brief summary of our main findings. Some numerical highlights and a grid showing access activity in New York State cable systems follow.

In 1985, there were access channels and resources for producing access in nearly half of New York State's 160 cable systems, serving nearly 65% of cable subscribers. Nearly two-thirds of the systems with access provide production equipment. And there existed the immediate potential for expanded use of access — most systems would accept tapes from the public and, in many communities, other institutions such as libraries, schools, colleges and media centers had video production facilities. This makes public access television far more than a rarity.

But these institutions frequently did not know about public access. Cable companies rarely let the public know that they have access channels and facilities and often made it difficult to use them. Our statistics show that only fifteen cable systems provided comprehensive support for access — providing training and regularly scheduled time slots, as well as conducting outreach and publicity.

While access could benefit from more acknowledgement and support, there was a moderate amount of programming on access channels, some of it very informative and creative. The typical system had between one and ten hours per week of access programming. Over twenty systems (25% of those with access) had between twenty and fifty hours of access programming per week. Almost half of the state's cable systems were very small, with under 3,500 subscribers. Fifteen of these little systems provided at least some access. Meanwwhile, Manhattan's two systems each regaled viewers with two channels programmed twenty hours a day, seven days a week.

The systems with more support for access tended to have more programming. For example, a group of media activists in Schenectady formed a non-profit organization to provide additional equipment and training for community users and act as access advocates in the franchising process and beyond. Through the active encouragement of access coordinator, Ruth Fonda, the area's many social service agencies produced over two hundred programs, Public Service Announcements and Community Bulletin Board announcements in the year preceding our survey. This combined effort to develop a community communications channel paid off. Schenectady ran approximately 50 hours of access programming per week.

Even in places with minimal access programming, one good show could make a significant contribution. In Glens Falls, we were told of a magazine-format show that "everybody watched." When one of the two producers retired, temporarily canceling the show, viewers complained of missing this lively source of politics, gossip, arts, entertainment, local news and opinion.

Who uses access? In Tarrytown, where the access facility was housed in an arts and community center, the diversity and energy of groups using access was inspiring. Local artists, "high school kids who'll do anything," a Black community activist, an Hispanic Pentecostal church, children in school plays and sports, local politicians ("not just at election time"), and a local Spanish teacher all used access in the year preceding our survey.

Video production, both curricular and extracurricular, was becoming widespread in public schools. With the ease of use, quality and availability of half-inch video equipment, arts organizations, too, were becoming more and more interested in documenting and publicizing their work through video, and were exploring the use of cable to reach new audiences. Consumer video equipment was already putting video production within the reach of a wide range of individuals and community organizations.

Surveys from other parts of the country have established that good access programming — not necessarily slick, but informative, creative, technically sufficient, and reflective of the local community — has attracted audiences competitive in size with public television. While few formal audience surveys have been conducted for access in New York State, community feedback has been positive. Several program directors commented on the com-

Highlights of Findings (September 1985)

We received responses from 141 of the approximately 160 cable systems in New York State.

Of these, 76 had public access, 60 had regular access programming (more than 0 hours per week), and 16 had rare or occasional access programming.

Cable television was available to 53.6% of New York State's households.

30.7% of all households in the state subscribed to cable. Thus cable television reached over 2.1 million households.

64.9% of these subscribers -- a total of almost 1.4 million households -- could receive public access programming and put access programs on cable.

The three most frequent types of access programming were sports, religious programming and programs by or about community organizations.

14 systems allocated one full channel for access, 55 allocated less than one channel, and the remaining five set aside more than one channel for access.

5 systems programmed less than one hour of access per week.
24 systems programmed 1-5 hours per week.
14 systems programmed 6-10 hours per week.
6 systems programmed 11-20 hours per week.
6 systems programmed 21-30 hours per week.
5 systems programmed 31-50 hours per week.
3 systems programmed over 50 hours per week (Schenectady and the two Manhattan systems).

Few cable systems without access had other local programming. Only one system of the 65 systems with no access had Local Origination programming (LO, local programs produced by cable staff). Two had leased access. At least ten had a Community Bulletin Board (CBB). None of the rest had any local programming at all.

In contrast, 50 of the 75 systems with access also had LO supplemented by government, educational and/or leased access. An additional 10 had CBBs. Thus, a total of 64 of the 76 access-carrying systems had some form of local programming in addition to access.

45 systems had equipment available for access production.

33 systems offered training in how to use that equipment.

48 systems ran regularly scheduled shows.

42 publicized their access programming in local publications or on the TV channel guide.

19 did outreach to potential producers.

15 systems had equipment and training and regularly scheduled shows and outreach and publicize their access programming.

In most systems with public access, the cable company ran access production and programming.

However, there were 14 systems where some other entity ran programming, and an additional four had another entity running production. These included non-profit organizations, local governments and universities.

munity service, good will and improved corporate image fostered through access.

Our study indicates that the status of public access is mixed, with some bright spots and much uncertainty. However, there is a base to grow on. There are channels and resources for producing access. Diverse groups and individuals, urban and rural, upstate and downstate, are making and showing access programs. We found basic resources for access in most places. But only a small number of cable systems provided the commitment and support necessary for the development of access as a vital community communications medium.

Chapter 2
Access Programming

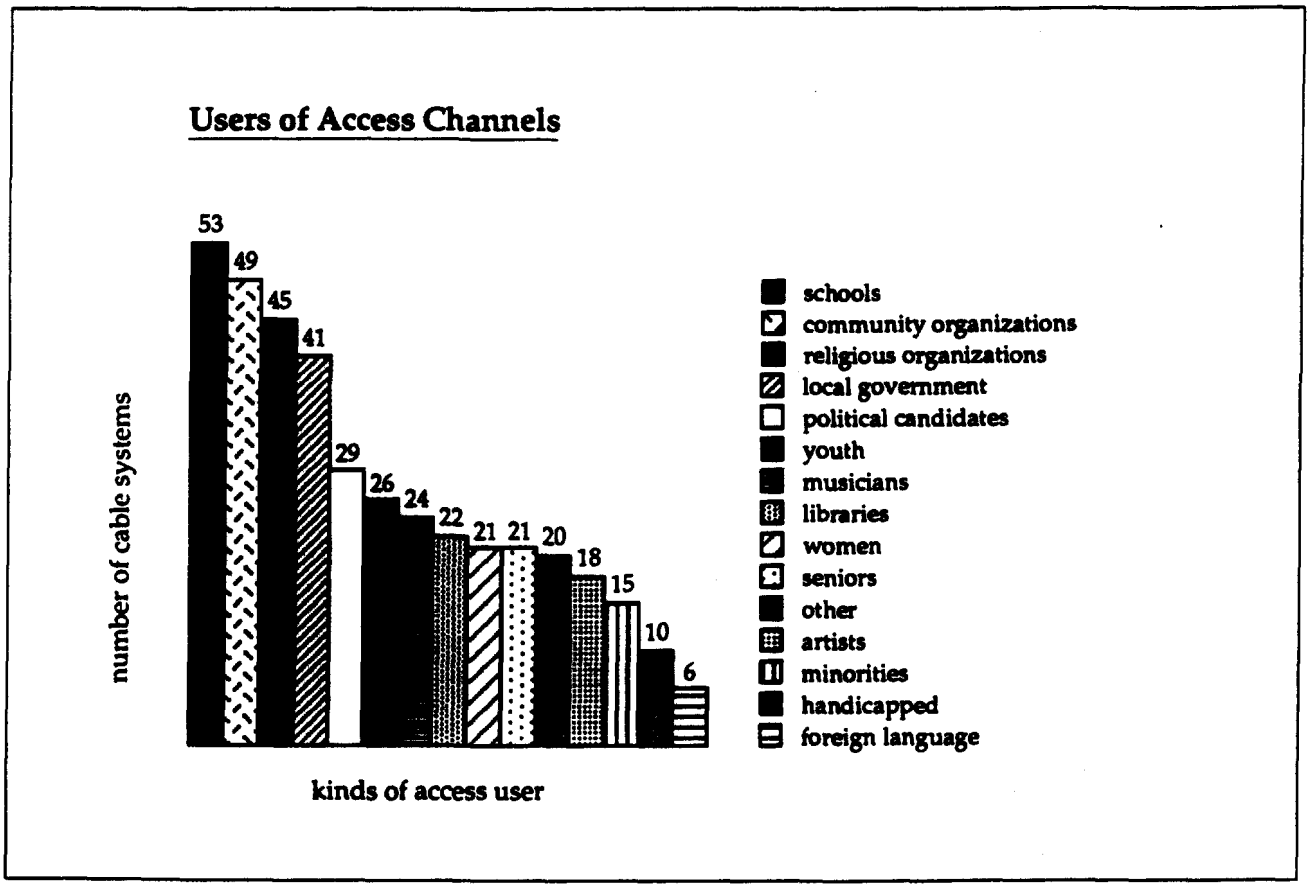
Who Uses Access and What Do They Produce?

Public access TV is television. So the key to understanding it is the programming itself — which is inseparable from its producers. The only time most people hear about public access is when there is a controversy — usually concerning local opposition to pornographic or racist programming. While these issues are certainly important, and the reactions to these programs are useful studies of how communities deal with the conflicts of individual free speech and community standards, focusing on them gives a misleading impression of the bulk of access programming. In fact, nearly all respondents to our survey said that there had been no incidents of this kind on their access channels.[1]

As the tables illustrate, most access programming is as American as apple pie. The most frequent users of access are schools, community organizations and religious institutions. Local school sports is the most abundant type of programming.

Schools

Since many schools have their own video equipment, it is not surprising that they produce much access programming. School shows range from live or taped coverage of school sports to school plays and concerts, music videos, school and community news, and even parodies of commercial television. Some schools, especially high schools and universities, produce shows for



access as part of a television production curriculum. These are typically studio talk shows and short documentaries. In these cases, and especially where a school is the sole access facility in a community, students may cover local events, such as local elections or parades, history, or community organizations. The majority of school productions are done as extra-curricular activities.

Community Organizations

Community organizations use access channels in a variety of ways, depending on the resources available. Weekly or occasional talk shows, often with live telephone calls from listeners, short documentaries to educate the community about services or programs, or simply informational Public Service Announcements are frequent forms of productions.

The types of community organizations using access give a cross-section of Main Street, USA. Mentioned at least once, and many several times, were Elks, Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions clubs; the Better Business Bureau, gardening clubs, Women of the World, the Bowling Championship, United Way, the local Sheriff's Departmen`t, the ASPCA, Black Men & Women of Central New York, organizations for Vietnam veterans, Volunteer Fire Departments and Explorer Clubs.

Community events provide popular programming: festivals, parades, awards events hosted by organizations, and election debates were all mentioned. These are popular because, as the coordinator Champlain Newchannels put it, "People like to see their local community on TV."

Religious Programming

There is a lot of religious programming on access, some of it imported, much of it local. Many religious institutions — churches, synagogues, and mosques — have their own production equipment, and able volunteers who regularly not only tape and edit services, but also produce shows presenting speakers, advice, music, programming for particular audiences, such as the home-bound, or gay Christians. Members of one church produced a program about an earthquake in the congregation's native country.

But religious programming is not universally popular. Several programmers said viewers complained that there was too much religious programming on the access channel. Some even worried that the channel was "swamped" with it, and wished there was more variety.

Local Politics

Mayors, Town Supervisors, state Assemblypersons, Congressmen and Congresswomen, Senators and the Governor are familiar faces on access channels, both in taped presentations from the State Capitol or Washington and in live local call-in programs where constituents can question them about local issues. One monthly call-in show with a State Senator, on TKR Cable, had "more calls than they can handle on the air." Most cable systems do not have separate government access channels, although some program managers noted a 7 to 8 PM slot for government access programs.

Respondents also often noted live or taped coverage of City Council and Town Board meetings, nationally among the most watched access programming.

In a few places, local citizens covered local political and social events. For example, in Lockport, a retired journalist hosted a weekly discussion program, bringing local political and community leaders into the studio. High school students in East Hampton covered local news and important public hearings, and provided the only televised local election coverage in that area. For several years, a local Black activist in Tarrytown hosted a popular call-in program, covering community issues from a Black community perspective.

Arts Programs

Local arts programs had a foothold in New

York State, most often in the form of performing arts. Several cable systems mentioned taping the local symphony. Troy's cable system played a program bicycled around the Albany area that previewed Albany Symphony performances, discussing the pieces to be played and other features. Classical wasn't the only music on access. Several systems featured local bands taped in bars and other settings. Music videos were also popular. A lip-sync special by Woodstock high school students was a local hit. Arts programming on access also included several arts review, discussion and profile programs. Staff at the new LTV access center in Amagansett said they had an archive of artists profiles ready to feature on their new channel.

"Outside" Programming

Some of the programming discussed in this chapter was imported from outside, as opposed to locally produced programming. Most notably, these include the shows sent in by local political representatives and the Governor, and many religious programs. Outside programming also included Public Service Announcements, for example from the Epilepsy Foundation, Heart Association or Red Cross. Other examples ranged from the innocuous to the controversial, depending on the community: Canadian Tourism promotions, Right to Life debates and propaganda, old industrial promotion films, Paper Tiger TV. Many access channels required local sponsors for outside programming, or a local wrap-around or introduction.

Community Bulletin Boards

One unexpected finding was the immense popularity of Community Bulletin Boards. Many systems without access had flourishing CBBs, "with everything from church suppers...," in the words of George Vosburgh, Program Manager in Canajoharie. CBBs also drew and kept viewers tuned to the access channel, and gave it a community presence beyond the hours of programming the community was able to produce at any one time. Some CBBs were open only to non-profit organizations. Others also accepted classified announcements from local non-profit organizations and businesses, partially underwriting the channel's operation.

Local Origination and Public Access

Local Origination programming is programming produced by a cable company's local staff. It is commercial and usually includes local advertisements. Public access, in contrast, is produced mostly by non-staff producers, whether individuals or organizational representatives, and all decisions on content and form are up to them, as well as all liability for the programs. Unlike LO, access programming cannot contain commercials or solicit funds.

However, in practice, in many communities in New York State, the distinction between LO and access was not this clear. In many systems where the cable operator ran access, one or two staff people programmed the channels, produced programs for community organizations or local government, trained community volunteers and did outreach for all community programming.

This meant, for example, that the taping of community events, like a Town Council meeting or a parade, might be suggested by a member of the public, be taped by the cable staff person and one or two volunteers, and edited by the staff person. In some cases, it seemed that this gave the cable staff person far too much decision-making power to call the program "access". We were told over and over that all programming on the channels "reflected on the company" and that controversial subjects were avoided. On the other hand, many staff people were dedicated to helping community residents get their ideas, issues, and programs on the air, and to learn how to produce television as well.

In nearly all cases, staff people in this position seemed to have their hands more than full, and could not devote enough time to outreach, training, and maintaining volunteers to help access grow beyond a handful of individuals or community groups.

Often, a staff person decided whether to help a local resident produce an access show, or to

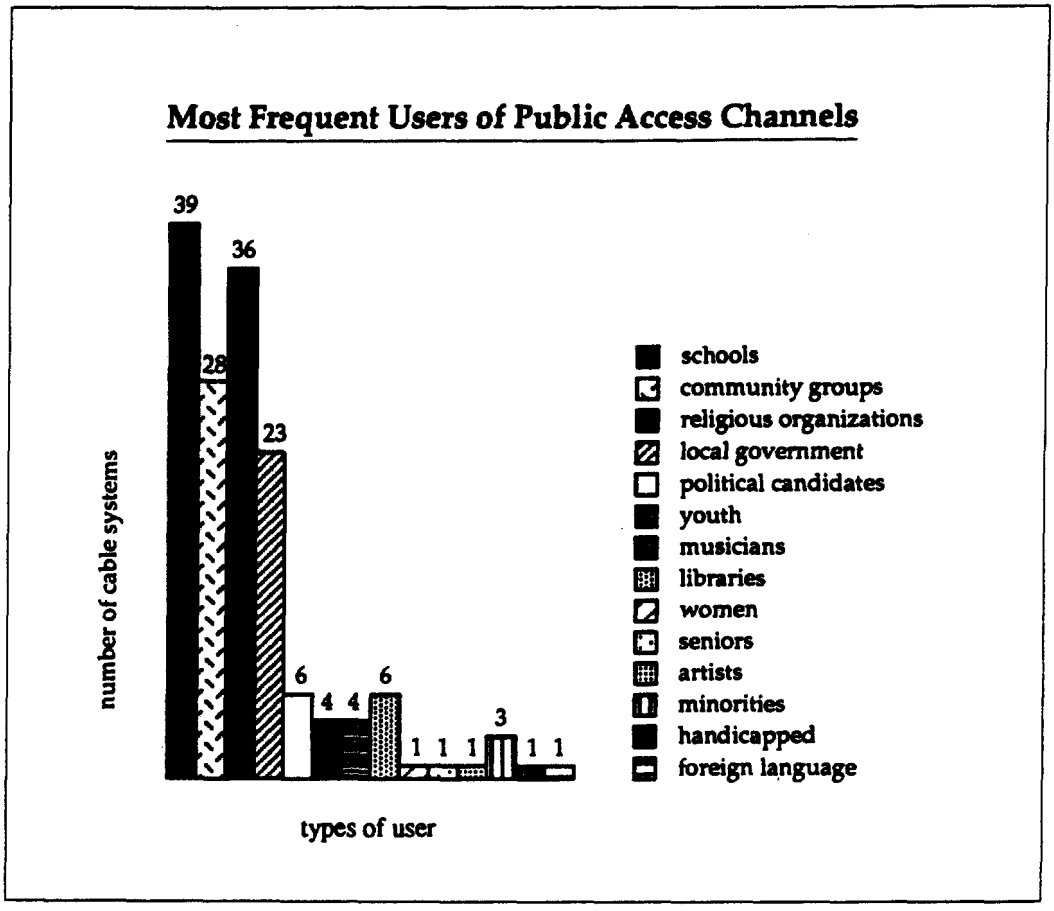
produce a show as an LO production. This decision often hinged on cable company staff's ideas of quality. If the idea was good, or seemed to call for better technical quality, or had commercial potential, an LO program was often preferred by the staff person (and possibly by the community resident, although we spoke only to staff people involved).

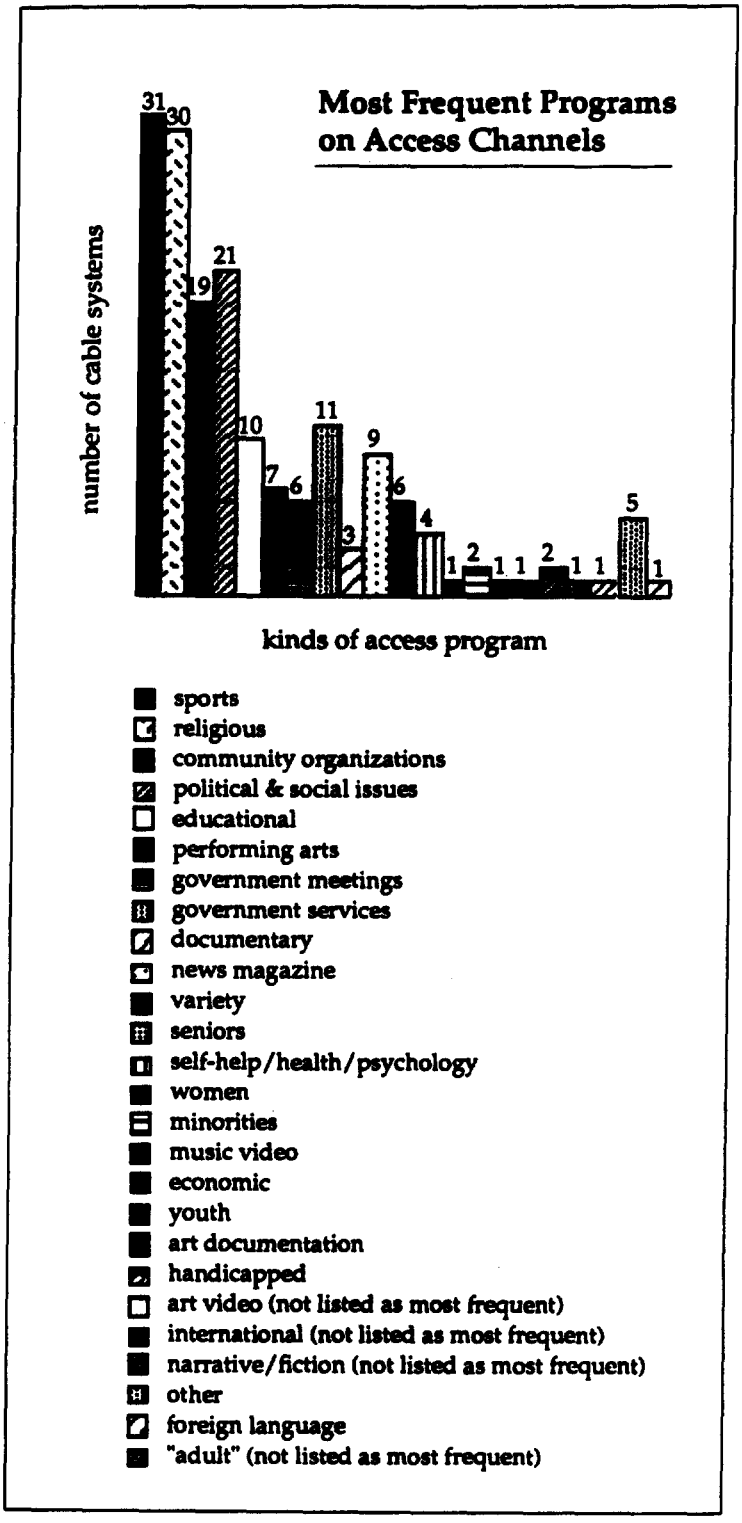
Controversy and Censorship

We found only two examples of controversial programming, and both had been settled by the producers and the access channel. But even though only access producers are legally liable for their programs, many cable staff people we spoke to were concerned about program content, and most pre-screened tapes brought in by access producers. Libel, obscenity and technical quality were their main concerns, as well as politically controversial programming. A few of the larger access organizations responded that access producers signed forms covering copyright clearance and accepting all responsibility for program content. Some noted that they wanted to make sure the subject would be of interest to viewers, or that there were no commercials, lotteries or appeals for funds on the tapes. They often stressed that all programming reflected on the cable company, and that viewers did not distinguish between company-produced and access-produced programs. (It is unclear whether labeling of channels or program hours clarified this distinction.)

However, despite their concerns, most cable staff said that almost any tape brought in was cablecast, and could not list any tapes they had refused. Several said they used the pre-screening process as an opportunity to help producers improve their production techniques.

In general, programming reflected the communities it came from. Woodstock is full of arts and politics, Schenectady and Lockport featured





concerned citizens and local arts. Amagansett profiled the many major American artists who live there. New York City intensified every trend, and Albany was a model of civic involvement.

Up to now, this chapter has focused on individual program types or issues. The following charts, generously sent by the access coordinator of the Sammons-Cortland system, give an overview of a fairly active access cable operated channel in a small city in the state.

Notes:

1. The often cited New York City example of pornographic programming was actually solved many years ago by moving objectionable programming to late hours or off the public access channels entirely to leased access. It was not cited by respondents as a problem. The example noted by a respondent was in Woodstock, and the negotiated solution at the time involved convening a group of citizens to define "community standards" and moving programming with sexual or violent content to later hours.

A few other representative comments concerning censorship and program review: In Cortland, there were no restraints on format or content. The channel reserved the right to preview programs, and each producer signed a channel use agreement which included a clause stating that all copyright issues had been cleared by the producer. In Schenectady, the coordinator said they didn't try to control content; they would help, not criticize producers. They rarely turned down programming and believed their success was due to their helpful, accepting attitude. In Lockport, the cable commission reviewed programming and based its decision to cablecast according to production values and interest to the public. "Controversial programs are no good," one commission member told us.

Chapter 3
Cable Systems and Access

This study examines characteristics of public access cable TV in New York State to see what public access is in different kinds of communities and what allows it to flourish or prevents it from growing. Since public access exists in a wide variety of cable systems, in this chapter we examine relevant cable system characteristics, mainly from printed sources, to provide a context for our questionnaire and interview data, and to see how these factors affect public access TV.

What is a Cable System?

A *cable system* is a network of coaxial wires bringing cable programming to viewers in a particular geographical area. This area, usually one city, town or county, contracts with a cable company to provide cable service for that area. This contract is called a *franchise*. The overwhelming majority of cable systems are monopolies in their geographic area, although the Supreme Court recently decided that this need not be the case. Cable systems are franchised by municipalities because municipal streets and utility poles (*rights of way*) are used to distribute the cables. In addition, all communications media — radio, TV, newspapers — are regulated on constitutional grounds related to the First Amendment because the diversity of information sources and the public exchange of ideas, information and opinion are considered vital to the functioning of our democracy.

Generally, cable systems correspond to the existing political boundaries of villages, towns, cities and divisions of cities and counties. In recent years, however, cable systems have often been bought, sold or consolidated with neighboring systems. So the boundaries of one cable system may vary over time. Some cable systems combine several municipalities as part of one franchise. Others serve several franchises with programming coming from a single *head-end*.

A head-end is the main distribution point for a cable system, the point at which programming is transferred to coaxial cable for transmission throughout the cable system. Programming can be obtained by a variety of means, originating live from a studio, picked up from satellite, microwave or broadcast) transmissions, or from videotape playback. Most cable systems have only one head-end, but some also have secondary head-ends, where programming can be added either to the whole system or just to *downstream households* (those households located on the cable wire after the point at which programming is added). For example, Kingston Cablevision sends its programming by microwave to Woodstock, where an access channel is added for just the Woodstock households.

There are also *interconnects* between some systems which allow them to share programming at prearranged times. Access and other local programming can be shared in this way.

A Profile of New York State Cable Systems

New York State had 159 cable systems at the time of our survey. These cable systems passed 53.6% of New York State households. That is, 53.6% of state residents could subscribe to cable if they wished to.

Another way of looking at this is through municipalities franchised. In New York State, 1,141, or 73.8% of 1,541 municipalities had cable franchises. An additional 99, or 6% were negotiating franchises in 1984. A major set of franchises in negotiation at this time in New York City skewed these figures. Unwired portions of this city represented 33.4% of all state "dwelling units" or households.

Since these figures may seem confusing, it is helpful to look at them in several ways to gain an accurate picture of the significance of cable TV as a communications medium in New York State.

There were 2,110,717 households subscribing to cable television in New York state in 1984 out of a total of 6,867,638 dwelling units. This means that 30.7% of all state households subscribed to cable TV. If New York City was excluded, 47.1% of the state's households subscribed to cable. But cable service was not available everywhere. Where resi-

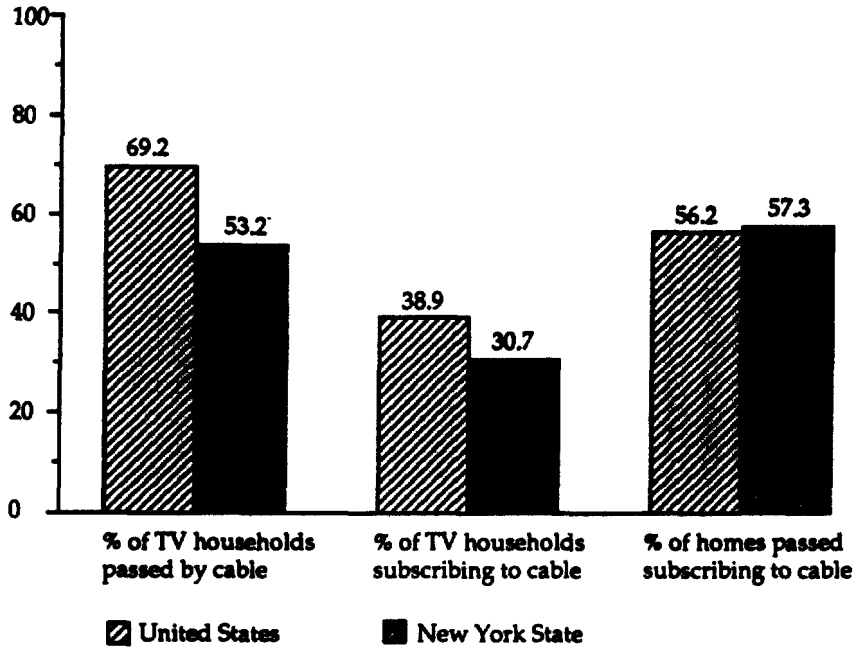
dents could subscribe to cable TV, 57.3% were subscribers, 61% outside of New York City.

How does access fit in this picture? Nearly 65% of New York State cable subscribers were served by systems where access time was available and they could contribute programming to those channels.

New York State was a microcosm of the nation in many ways. Only 53.6% of the state's households were located in areas where cable service was available, compared to 69% of US TV households.[1] But in those areas where cable service was available, 57.3% of New York State households — nearly the same as the 56.2% of US homes — subscribed to cable TV. We found no national statistics on access channels or programming, but the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers estimated that there were over 1,200 systems carrying access programming in 1984 among the approximately 6,000 cable systems nationwide. (By 1990, the NFLCP had raised its estimate to 2,000.)

The cable industry in New York State has been steadily growing, both in revenue and subscribers. In the 1980s, after a decade of uneven spurts of growth, revenue increases over the previous year fell from a peak of 35% to 18% in 1985 — but revenue amounts continued to in-

Cable subscribers in the U.S. and in New York State



New York State data from the New York State Commission on Cable Television, 1984. U.S. data from *Cablevision*, September 16, 1984, page 54.

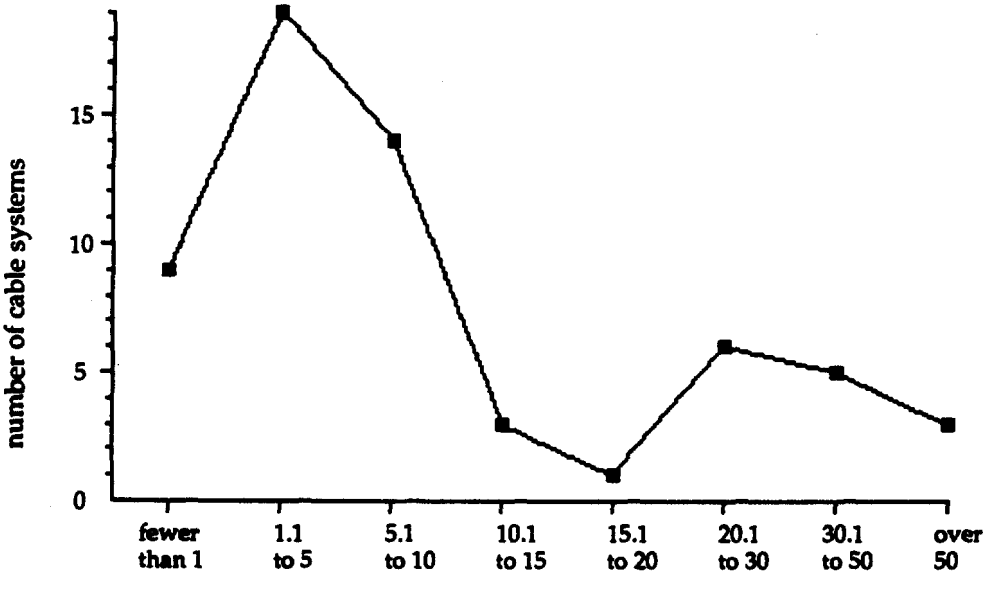
crease. Subscriber numbers continued to grow, too. After annual increases of 20% and 25% in 1980 and 1981, annual growth slowed to between 7 and 10%.[2]

What was the average New York State cable system like in 1984? This is a less useful abstract than one might expect. On average, the state's cable systems served 12,623 subscribers, while the median system served 3,078 subscribers. The state contained both the largest and some of the smallest systems in the country. Cablevision's Long Island system had over 200,000 subscribers, while 56 systems had less than 1,000 subscribers each. New York State includes extremes of geography, industry, ethnicity and wealth. Rust-belt and gentrified cities with multi-lingual, multi-ethnic neighborhoods, wealthy and struggling middle class suburbs, a variety of rural farming areas, sparsely settled mountain preserves, artists' colonies, army bases and Native American communities are all part of New York State. Cable systems in the state reflected this diversity.

Access Programming

How much access programming was there in New York State? Of 159 cablesystems in New York State, 76 had access in some form and 65 had no access channels or facilities. In terms of subscribers served, 64.9% of the state's cable subscrib-

Average Weekly Hours of Public Access Programming in New York State Cable Systems



ers could receive access programming.[3]

But not all systems that accepted access programming actually cablecast access programs in 1984. The median number of hours of access programming for all systems with access was only one hour per week. But when only those sixty systems that actually cablecast programs in 1984 are included, the median rises to eight hours per week.

The average number of hours of programming per week for all systems with access was 24.8 hours, while the average for all systems with access programming was 31 hours per week, reflecting the few systems with full channels. Only 30% of systems with access had more than ten hours per week of access programming. This did not include other kinds of community communications on cable, such as the popular Community Bulletin Boards.

This gives a clearer idea of what access is in most places in New York State: one to three evenings a week, or a couple of hours a night of community produced programming. The bulk of this report will explore what this programming is, how it is made, and who is producing public access TV in the state.

Access and Cable System Size

Did the number of subscribers affect whether a cable system had access? Much of cable regulation has used 3,500 subscribers as the benchmark for whether access provisions were required. In New York State, systems with less than 3,500 subscribers were much less likely to have access channels. Almost half of all New York State cable systems had less than 3,500 subscribers. These 79 systems served only 87,217 subscribers altogether — 4.1% of New York State subscribers. Only fifteen of these systems had access.

If very small systems tend not to have access, our data does show that larger systems are more likely to have it. This may be due to a variety of factors: federal and state regulation, more citizen advocacy and organization, more awareness on the part of municipal authorities, or the bidding process for these more likely sources of profit. However, outside of very small and very large systems, within the mid-range, size did not seem to be a significant factor determining the presence of access.

The median New York State cable system had 3,078 subscribers, the smallest with 71 (Forest Cable) and the largest with 231,342 (Cablevision Systems Development-Long Island). The median size of systems with access was three times larger — 9,692 subscribers. The averages display the same disparity: 12,623 for all systems and 18,556 for systems with access.

If systems smaller than the 3,500 benchmark for access requirements are excluded, however, a different picture emerges. There were 83 cable systems in New York State with 3,500 or more subscribers; the median had 11,706. The 59 systems with access that were larger than 3,500 subscribers had a median size of 12,030, less than 2% larger than the systems without access.[4]

Access and the Communications Needs of Different-Sized Communities

According to our data and interviews, the communications needs of small and large communities are similar, but the appropriate technology for meeting these needs differs.

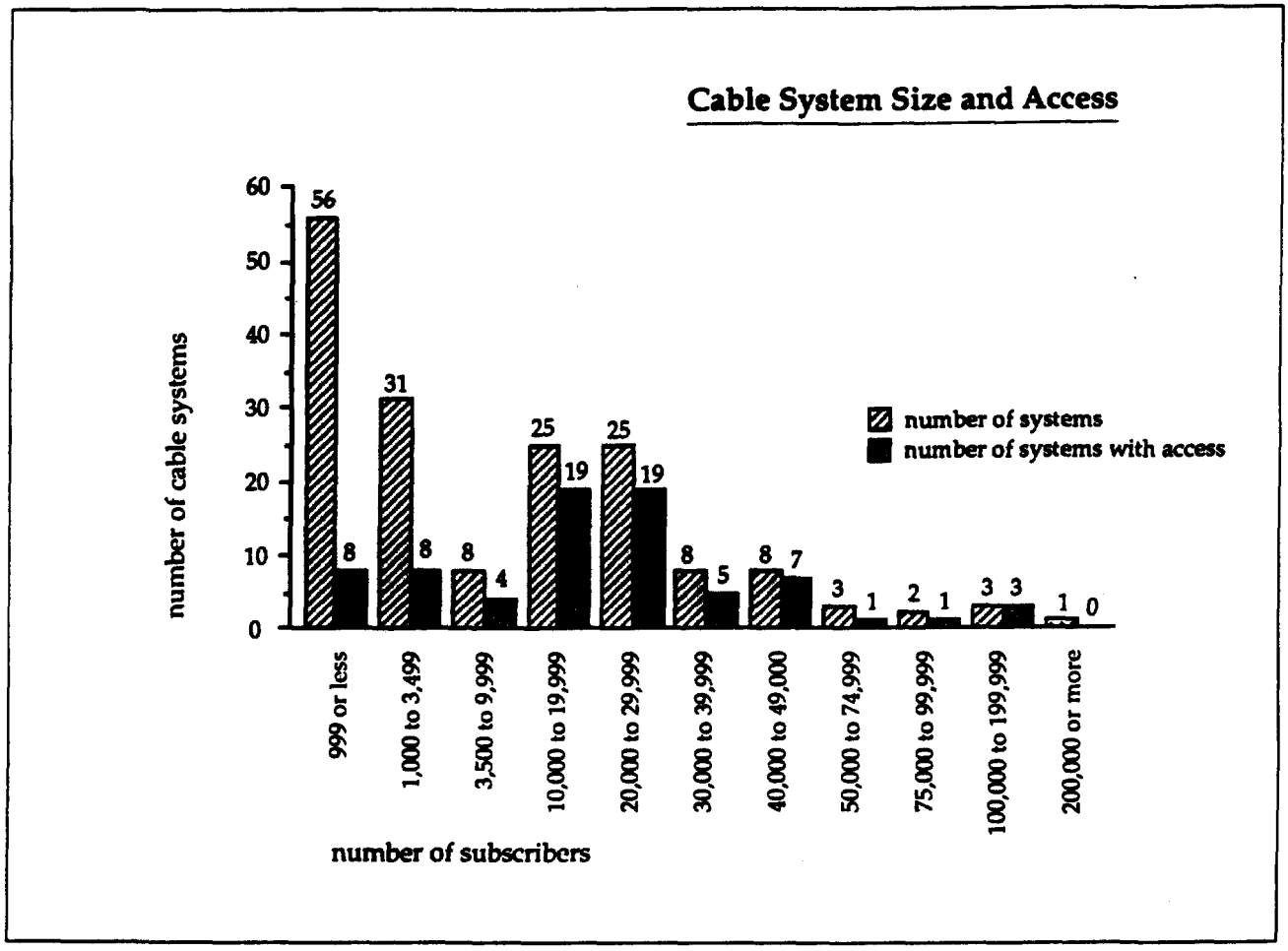
The needs of very small systems are often considered a special case. Our discussions with small-system operators revealed that most felt their subscriber base was too small to support access, both because people communicate effectively in other ways and because the equipment and staff investment is too much for their companies to absorb. For example, the manager of Simmons Cable of River Valley, a 12-channel system with 906 subscribers, said that people get local news in cafes, restaurants, and the post office. The manager of Woodhull TV, with 120 subscribers, said his system did not have a Community Bulletin Board, but, he added, "We have a sign-up sheet in front of the firehouse."

Many managers of small systems without access mentioned flourishing Community Bulletin Boards (CBBs). Even where there was access pro-

gramming, these appeared to be quite popular. Valley Cable in Canajoharie, with 2,913 subscribers, had had an access channel for a year in the 1970s. Their most popular show featured a call-in DJ, but the channel was discontinued for "lack of local interest." Today, their CBB is active 24 hours a day with "everything on it, from church suppers...," the manager explained. In Potsdam, with 7,566 subscribers, where one access channel is filled 30 hours a week by students' programming from the State University of New York at Potsdam, the cable company maintains a CBB with "more than we can handle from non-profit organizations."

Community Bulletin Boards have a long history in community television. Woodstock Access TV's hand-drawn rollodex wheel, powered by an "Erector Set" motor, carried both community announcements and local underwriting to bring in revenue for the channel. Apple Bytes, the model program developed at the Alternative Media Center at New York University, allowed both students and community volunteers to transform community announcements into three-to-ten page illustrated stories for Manhattan's municipal access channel.

Outside of CBBs, there seemed to be growing interest in access by both the public and small-



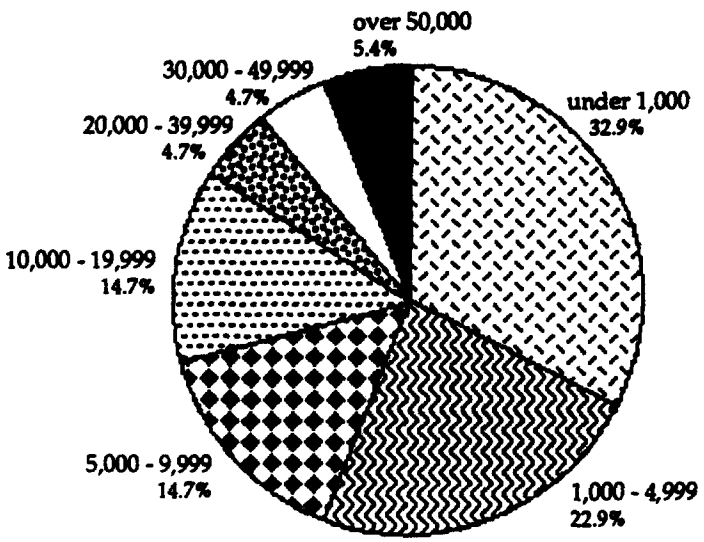
system operators. Some system operators said they didn't have access because no one had asked for it. If there was a demand, time would be made available "as a public service," one operator said. Others noted public interest and mentioned plans for obtaining channel time for access or providing some access through local interconnects.

A few small systems did provide access. The manager of Champlain Newchannels, a system with 1,412 subscribers, said that people liked to see their local community, especially their children and local sports. The system received good feedback and good press from a Christmas show, and although it had been able to attract few producers, a subscriber survey found that people liked public access.

Mid-sized systems, the most likely to have public access, listed a variety of reasons for providing it. Thomas Casey, of the Sam-mons system in Cortland, said, "I believe it's tremendous." According to the company's surveys, "It has contributed tremendously to our visibility in the community [and] it helps people put their message out." Wendy Sakora, manager of Group W Cable in Elmira, said letters and feedback at community presentations showed that people were glad that something was being produced with "local flavor." Several system managers said access provided good PR for the company.

Larger systems, too, found much benefit to both their companies and the public in access. Laurie Bellanger, production facilities manager at the Rogers Cable system in Syracuse, said access brought good feedback and provided a great opportunity to "cover things people can't go to; it's fun, it makes things visible to the community, and although it's expensive it's worth it as a public service." Tom Rippolon, access coordinator for American Cable's Tarrytown system, said the company felt that the concrete community service programming on access, including elections, football, and local availability of channel time, was important in marketing and franchising. A cost-benefit relationship for access is hard to substantiate, he said, but local organizations that produce programs encouraged their members to subscribe. Subscriber

What Size are New York State Cable Systems?



number of subscribers
and percent of the whole

retention was noted by Capitol Cablevision's Greg Bobbitt as the key asset public access contributed to cable companies.

Not all feedback was positive from mid- and larger-sized systems. Several complained about too much religious programming. The issue of "quality programming" came up several times. For example, the manager of Syracuse Newchannels said the quality of access programming was not good. They don't need to offer access, he said, since the company wins franchises by offering staff-produced Local Origination programming. Other managers were concerned that all programming reflects on the company, making "quality" and higher production values crucial issues for cable companies.

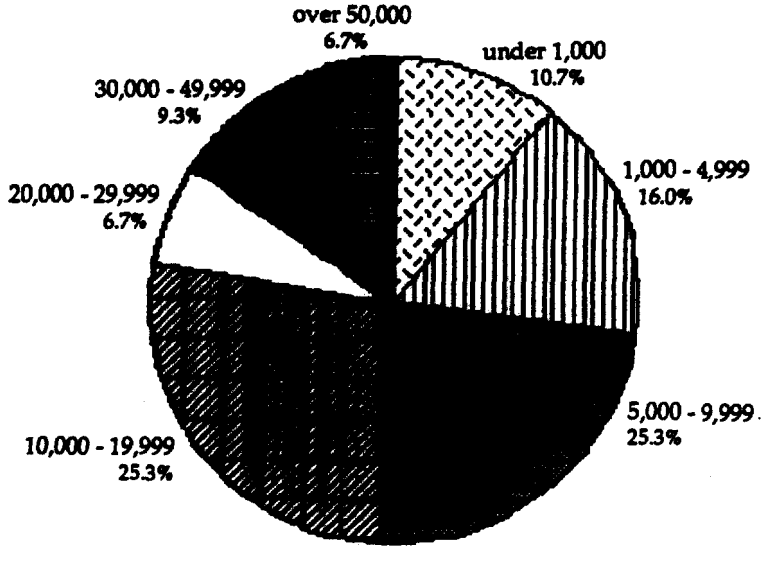
However, two systems with active access channels found that the quality of access productions improved markedly over two years of providing public access. Ruth Fonda of Schenectady Cablevision described the process, "as people became more knowledgeable about the equipment and [gained] more experience and aware[ness] of how to do things."

Cable System Ownership and Access

Thirty percent of the cable systems included in this study were independently owned. By this, we mean owned by New York State-based individuals or corporations owning only one cable system. We also include in this definition cable systems which are owned by municipalities or citizen cooperatives. These 48 systems serve a disproportionately small number of subscribers — only 3% of the total, or 69,743 households. The percentage of these systems that have access channels or services is 23%.

The overwhelming majority of New York State cable systems were owned by multiple system operators (MSOs). MSOs are simply "corporate or private concerns owning more than one cable system."[5] We included MSOs entirely based in New York State and those either owning systems or based outside New York State. MSOs owned 70% of New York State cable systems, serving 97% of New York State subscribers. Sixty-six percent of MSO-owned cable systems

What Size are New York State Cable Systems with Access?



number of subscribers
and percent of the whole

offered access services.

Many MSOs were owned by corporations with other communications interests. According to *Broadcasting/Cablecasting Yearbook*, 38% of cable operators nationally are affiliated with broadcast interests, 21% with program producers, and 33% with newspapers.[6]

Are MSO-owned cable systems more likely to have access than independently owned systems? Our data indicates that this may be the result, since 66% of MSO-owned systems had access versus 23% of independent systems. But the reason seem to have more to do with the average size of these two categories of cable systems rather than their ownership.

MSO-owned systems in New York State had an average of 18,103 subscribers, compared to an average of 1,453 subscribers for independently owned systems. MSO systems averaged 28 channels, compared to 17 for independents. MSO systems also tended to be newer systems, built during the expansion of cable in the 1970s and 1980s, while many independent systems began cablecasting in the 1950s and 1960s as a way to retransmit broadcast programming to mountainous areas.

Of the 43 MSOs operating in New York State, 21 owned more than one system in the state. Very few owned only New York State systems.[7]

Most subscribers in the state received cable service from large MSOs, like subscribers nationally. New York State's top ten MSOs serve three-quarters of the state's cable subscribers. Certainly this indicates that the attitudes concerning access and the policies of these few companies have great influence in the state. It also indicates that the concentration of cable ownership affects most New York State subscribers.

What is the relationship between access and MSO ownership? In general, larger systems tend to have access more than smaller systems, and larger systems tend to be owned by MSOs rather than by independent operators.[8]

There is no pattern indicating that MSOs in general provide access more or less than independent operators.[9] Some MSOs may have policies that support or do not support access, but our survey did not uncover these. From our data and interviews, other factors also seem crucial: the size of the systems, community support and advocacy for access, the franchises negotiated with the municipality, and the attitudes and commitments of individual managers, program directors and access coordinators.

Penetration Rate

Penetration rate measures what percent of a given community subscribes to cable out of all those who live where there is cable wiring. It can give a significant indication of how vital access can be in a given community, because penetration rate also describes the size of the potential local audience.
In other words, could a significant part of the community receive access programming if it was available?[10]

Although access can be successful if it reaches its targeted audiences (even if they are small), a higher penetration rate is important for access, since part of its purpose is to serve groups underserved by other media, and especially those under-represented in other television programming, such as ethnic, racial and language minorities, seniors and children.

Marketing analysts have considered a 30% penetration rate a break-even point for the commercial viability of a broadcasting system. This means that enough consumers would be reached to make it worth the expense to advertise. [11]

A 40% penetration rate is a benchmark figure for access to be effective, according to George Stoney, Professor of Film and Television at New York University and a person long involved in community television. Of course, universal service, or 100% penetration, would be the ideal situation for access as a community communications medium. But it is important to keep in mind that no communications medium reaches everyone. While 98% of US households own TVs, the highest audience share of any program has been 40%, and a good rating for a public television program is 1 to 3%. Other communications media — weekly newsmagazines, for example — reach even smaller parts of the population, yet are still influential.